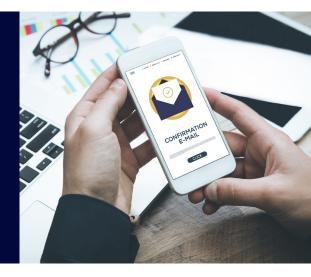# The future of onboarding

Capita

Five things you need to know about the future of onboarding

How connected are organisations to their new employees, and how can they maintain the human touch in a world where the COVID-19 pandemic is keeping us apart? When does onboarding start or end? Does the CV still have a role to play in the digital age, when background checks, like so much else, are moving online? And how is the contingent workforce changing the way organisations view and onboard their people?

Susie Thomson, **Managing Director of Security Watchdog (part of Capita)**, and **Peter Reagan**, **Senior Director of Contingent Workforce Strategies and Research at Staffing Industry Analysts**, recently addressed these questions in a podcast on the future of onboarding and employers' and candidates' expectations for the process.

Susie opened the discussion by asking how Peter would describe the onboarding process to the uninitiated. As a self-identified "ex-marketeer", Peter sees onboarding as essentially a customer journey for an employment candidate, dotted along the way with "moments of truth". The journey may start the moment a future candidate becomes aware of your brand and, if they have a bad experience at any stage, even just hearing negative stories about working at your organisation, their onboarding has hit a snag.

1. Onboarding doesn't end on day one

Peter felt that we need to start seeing the onboarding journey as starting much earlier than the first interview and continuing well past the new joiner's first day – far beyond what people typically think of as the onboarding process.

Susie agreed, pointing out that, in her experience, organisations increasingly see the onboarding journey as continuing for three or four months into someone's tenure in a new role.

Peter took the view that seeing a role's lifecycle as onboarding, offboarding and "the bit in the middle" was outdated. Until you're actually offboarding an employee, they're having a continuous experience of your organisation and "you need to get them to exit as what I call 'raving fans' – that's the minimum. 'Satisfied workers' is not an option". He added that, in the age of social media, this fandom is even more important: "You should continue that onboarding process so that, when they exit, whether they're a permanent worker or a contingent worker, they are going out into the world singing your praises. It doesn't stop until you offboard."

2. Onboarding has a new face in the age of COVID-19

Susie pointed out that onboarding has developed several different faces during the COVID-19 pandemic. Concepts like "home boarding" (supporting people with the networks and tools they need to work from home) and "reboarding" (bringing employees back into the workplace once it's safe to do so) are now commonplace.

The process of reboarding an existing team member, she said, will be quite different from that of onboarding a new starter.

This is because an existing employee being reboarded will naturally have concerns about issues such as workplace safety and social distancing rules. The reboarding process needs to demonstrate that employers understand these anxieties and maintain a connection with existing employees at every stage, so that they can return to work with confidence.

Onboarding a new joiner, by contrast, is underpinned by elements across a wide range of areas such as getting IT equipment, learning company policies and processes, and meeting one's team for the first time.

3. Background checking is a good way to connect

Susie was beginning to look at employee vetting in a new way after some of her colleagues in the recruitment industry suggested that there should be more focus on checking people's backgrounds simply to get to know them better: "To look at what people did properly in the past, their experiences, etc… what that person is actually like." She thought this an unusual application of background checks, which is all about robust scrutiny and mitigating risk, but acknowledged that getting to know your employees via background and social media checking was an interesting idea.

Peter pointed out that background checks traditionally serve a dual purpose:

- To confirm a person's account of what they've done in the past. They provide this information via a CV or online, and a background check aims to separate fact from fiction

- For compliance purposes in a financially-regulated or pharmaceutical organisation.

In his view, CVs don't add much value because it's easy for people to be less than honest in them.

4. The human touch is irreplaceable

Susie responded that, in this age of automation, the human touch is becoming even more important. Something that the pandemic has thrown into stark relief, when we're all battling with isolation, is how valuable the ability to connect with people is.

"How, she asked, "do we connect with our workforce and make them feel part of the family?"

Her customers are beginning to look for new, small ways to connect with their employees – as simple as sending a new joiner their favourite chocolate with a welcome message. Such small touches can make all the difference.

Peter agreed that, while automation may be taking over a lot of mundane tasks, it's not about to replace people. He passionately believes that human beings will have more time to focus on doing those jobs that only human beings can do – including onboarding and "having these types of conversations".

He's found that, counterintuitively, the pandemic has presented a great opportunity for collaboration that he had not previously appreciated. Technology, he believed, has played an unexpected role in connecting people – and not only in terms of keeping work networks alive and colleagues in touch. "Now I'm seeing people," he said, "not in a meeting room in their business attire and their business front. I'm getting to see people as human beings. I'm getting to see their children. I'm getting to see their dogs, the mess in the background. We're all becoming more connected through technology. It's a much more comfortable environment now."

5. Digital screening passports could be the next step

Susie said that technology's scope for enabling collaboration was better understood thanks to the accelerated pace with which the pandemic had forced its uptake. She felt it was likely that, in five years' time, digital screening passports would have replaced the current background checks and candidates would port their background screening profile from role to role, enabling a fast, seamless experience of onboarding. "We can predict that in our industry just from our customers' feedback. They're saying: 'Listen, we want things to be fast, we want them to be seamless, we want that exquisite candidate experience. Listen, can you create a digital passport?'"

The principle obstacle to this next step would be competition in the recruitment industry that prevents collaboration between background checking companies.

Peter also foresaw digital screening passports as the future, and that the social media component of background screening could only become more relevant.

Susie asked what kind of onboarding experiences would be most important to candidates. Peter replied that, for the contingent workforce, less seemed to be better. If your role has an expiry date, he suggested, you just want an ID badge and systems access and to know where the toilets are, plus any essential information around regulatory compliance, company policies and intellectual property that you'll need to perform your role.

However, he added, contingent workforce programmes are on the rise – contractors make up 44% of the workforce in continental Europe and 41% in the UK, so they're becoming a large part of the HR function. As the contingent workforce has become more of a strategic entity for organisations, contractors are onboarded in much the same way as permanent employees.

He said: "When these people exit your business, you want them to leave as raving fans. As we've said, the onboarding doesn't stop until you offboard. So as far as possible, as far as legislation allows in the country in which you're operating, you should be giving these contingent workers as good an onboarding experience as your permanent workers."

Susie, however, is a real believer in the CV. Simply comparing a candidate's CV against the online form they complete when applying for a role, she said, can highlight anomalies. "Especially in this COVID-19 environment," she said, "where you've got so many candidates applying for roles, they will want to enhance their credentials (so to speak); how far do they go?"

At least from the perspective of background checking, she insisted, the CV certainly isn't dead.

Peter conceded this might be the case today but insisted that, in 30 years' time, such documents will be obsolete. In an age of automation and data capturing, he said – pointing out that the pandemic has accelerated organisations' adoption of technology even further – if the best indicator of future performance is past performance, what people have achieved may be captured digitally and we won't need to rely on CVs to validate it.